

C'EST ENCORE MIEUX L'APRÈS-MIDI

by Ray Cooney, adapted by Jean Poiret

Melbourne French Theatre

Directed by Kotryna Gesait

Reviewed by Alan Dilnot – September 6, 2018

Our programmes informed us that *C'est Encore Mieux L'Après-Midi* is adapted from the English playwright Ray Cooney's *Two into One*. Maybe so, but in crossing the Channel Cooney's work has been completely Gallicised by Jean Poiret—although, that said, farce is farce wherever it is set. This production, under the expert direction of Kotryna Gesait, operated brilliantly within the confines of the very small space of Melbourne French Theatre.

With the aid of two screens, one at centre-back and one in a corner, five exits—the minimum for a successful farce—were constructed. The actors played out towards the audience rather than towards each other, meaning that we received every facial nuance, and also the feeling that we were almost part of the action. The pacing of the production was first-class, the dialogue sometimes running ahead of the subtitles, though they often moved faster than they could be read! There seemed to be no serious hesitations, and any confusion was always deliberate, a part of the plot! The tone was bright and cheerful; if there were anxieties they were all to be expected of those engaging in illicit affairs and cover-ups. The costuming deserves special mention, especially for the uniforms of the hotel staff. Wigs, dark glasses and other disguises were all deftly used.

The individual performances were all of a piece with these other excellences. I will give pride of place to Richard Ryan's Georges, as he had the most business to manage, with pretence, subterfuge and impromptu explanations all to be invented: his ability to show both willingness to please his employer, and his uncertainty as to what that required of him, were very impressive.

The central couple, Geoffrey Denans as Richard (a Government MP) and Mélissa Octave as Christine, conveyed very well spousal understanding with would-be philandering, suspicion with tolerance, as well as a mutual zest for adventuring.

The hotel staff were a joy to watch and hear. Michael Bula as the Hotel Director was suitably overbearing and indignant, with more than a touch of prudery; he gave a very emphatic

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(l-r) Julien Cayeux, Mariam-Alice Saad, Geoffrey Denans, Mélissa Octave, Richard Ryan, Heather Allardyce and Michael Bula in Melbourne French Theatre's C'est Encore Mieux L'Après-Midi. Photo by Jean-Philippe Héon.

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performance. Julien Cayeux as Mario, the hotel garçon, was delightful in his bumbling attempts to fill the orders of the hotel guests, always getting them wrong. Mariam-Alice Saad gave a very accomplished presentation as Richard's extra-marital friend; she was both seductive and independently-minded. Heather Allardyce as Florentine, the secretary of the political opposition, was well-contrasted with the other women, more sombre in looks and on the watch for slips in moral behaviour on the part of Richard.

Altogether this was a hugely enjoyable and exactly choreographed romp, and, as far as I was able to judge, conducted in perfect French, with just one word in English ('Why?') finding its way in.